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Pius XII and the Jews*

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ON JUNE 4, 1944, when the Allies entered Rome, the Jewish News Bulletin of the British Eighth Army spoke out:

To the everlasting credit of the people of Rome, and the Roman Catholic Church, the lot of the Jews has been made easier by their truly Christian offers of assistance and shelter. Even now, many still remain in places which opened their doors to hide them from the fate of deportation to certain death . . . The full story of the help given to our people by the Church cannot be told for obvious reasons, until after the war.

Today, 496 million Catholics all over the world, among them almost

35 million Americans, mourn the passing of their spiritual leader, Pope Pius XII. Representatives of other religions extend their profound sympathy to the Catholic world on its great loss. And today, almost fifteen years later, much more can be told about Pope Pius XII and his efforts in behalf of Jews at critical moments in world history.

It is known today that Pius XII was, to a large extent, personally instrumental in organized action to help Jewish victims of nazism and fascism. He made clear his profound concern in many ways. After the liberation of Rome, while there was apprehension over the fate of Jew-

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ish prisoners in Nazi-Fascist hands in Northern Italy and Germany, he made one of his most fervent pleas for brotherhood:

For centuries the Jews have been most unjustly treated and despised. It is time they were treated with justice and humanity. God wills it and the Church wills it. St. Paul tells us that the Jews are our brothers. Instead of being treated as strangers, they should be welcomed as friends.

Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli became Pontiff six months before the beginning of World War II. For a long time, he realized that the world was on the brink of the bloodiest war in history. The preservation of peace—"the fairest of all God's gifts"—was his driving concern. His temper and reactions were controlled by an acute, brilliant mind trained in the diplomatic service of the Vatican. It was a mind simultaneously active on several levels—diplomatic, humanitarian, charitable. During the early years of his reign, he made very few solemn political declarations lest he contribute to the angers and dissension of the world. His interest was not war, but peace.

Opposition to Nazism

But his opposition to nazism and his efforts to help Jews in Europe were well known to the suffering world. Despite the fact that Cardinal Pacelli had spent 12 years in Germany as a Papal Nuncio and was instrumental in signing a Concordat between Germany and the Vatican, both Hitler and Mussolini—through a violent press campaign—tried to

prevent his election as new Pontiff.

The day after his election, the Berlin *Morgenpost* said: "The election of Cardinal Pacelli is not accepted with favor in Germany because he was always opposed to nazism and practically determined the policies of the Vatican under his predecessor."

During the War

After the war started, on March 11, 1940, Von Ribbentrop, after a formal request for an audience, was received by the Pope. The German Foreign Secretary went into a lengthy harangue on the invincibility of the Third Reich, the inevitability of a Nazi victory, and the futility of Papal alignment with the enemies of the Fuehrer.

The Pope listened patiently and impassively to the very end of Von Ribbentrop's speech. Then he opened an enormous register on his desk and, in perfect German, began a recital of the catalogue of persecutions inflicted by the Third Reich upon individuals in Poland. He listed the date, place and precise details of each crime. The audience was terminated, the Pope's position clear.

Pius XII's humanitarian efforts to ease the lot of the Jews continued throughout the war. French, Dutch, Ukrainian bishops acted on behalf of Jews on instructions from the Pope. Their success or failure was determined, to a large extent, by the degree of cooperation received from the local population.

The Holy See established several offices devoted to rescue work

among the victims of Nazis—including, of course, Jews. The Relief Commission and Commission for Help to Refugees were among them. The three letters U.I.V. (Uffizio Informazioni Vaticano—Vatican Office of Information) are remembered by hundreds of thousands who first heard them in connection with news of relatives who had been missing, interned, or enslaved.

When the Fascist regime in Italy started to expel Jewish citizens from governmental and scientific positions, the Pope invited many of them to the Vatican. The president and two professors of the University of Rome and a famous geographer, all Jews ousted by the Fascists, received important positions in the Vatican City. Bernard Berenson received asylum in a villa near Florence, which belonged to the Minister of the Holy See to the Republic of San Marino. Under the flag of the Vatican's diplomatic immunity, he and his family lived there until British and American troops arrived in the late summer of 1944.

When Rabbi Herzog appealed to Pius XII from Jerusalem, the Pontiff answered that he would do "all in my power to end the persecution of the Jews."

Thousands of Jewish refugees poured into Vatican City; thousands of others sought shelter in the basilicas and other buildings of the Holy See outside the Vatican wall. No less than 15,000 were sheltered at Castel Gandolfo. The Pope sent by hand a letter to the bishops instructing them to lift the enclosure

from convents and monasteries so that they could become refuges for the Jews. When the Nazis forbade ritual slaughter, the Pope sent *shohetim* into Vatican City to perform the ritual slaughter there and store food for Jews sheltered there. Throughout the city, priests and nuns often at great personal risk smuggled Jews to places of sanctuary in churches, monasteries and other institutions. More than 180 places of refuge were made available in Rome and secret asylum given to more than 7,000 fugitive Jews.

As a result of these activities, often reported in the official press of the Holy See, the Fascist press even referred to the *Osservatore Romano* as "a mouthpiece of the Jews."

At one point, Hitler threatened to enter Vatican City. The German Ambassador in Rome talked him out of it.

Once, the Chief Rabbi of Rome was summoned and told that he was expected to deliver to German authorities—by noon of the following day—one million lire and 100 pounds of gold. If he failed, the Nazis said, they would order the immediate dispersal of Jews—which meant atrocities and death. The Jewish community of Rome did not have one hundred pounds of gold and the Chief Rabbi appealed for help to Pius XII. The Pope immediately instructed the Vatican treasurer to raise whatever amount was still needed. In less than a day, by melting down religious vessels, one hundred pounds of gold were raised.

Italian Jews know how much

they owed to Pius XII. A prominent Jewish citizen of Rome declared: "Our Catholic brothers have done more for us than we can ever do to repay." And another Jew, at a meeting of the National Committee of Liberation, said: "It was in the name of the frankest feeling of brotherhood that the Church did its utmost to rescue our threatened people from destruction. The supreme ecclesiastical authorities and all those priests who suffered for us

in imprisonment and in concentration camps have our eternal gratitude."

After the war, Pius XII addressed a group of European Jews who had come to the Vatican to thank him "for his generosity on their behalf during their persecution." The Pope, obviously moved by the demonstration, told them that the Church ". . . could rise above all narrow and arbitrary limits created by human selfishness and racial passions."

